When the Cleveland Browns entered training camp, it seemed like the stars were aligning more or less perfectly. An armful of expectations borne of a 10 win season in which they didn't make the playoffs greeted them. No first, second or third round picks assured them that they'd have no holdouts. The starting quarterback already was firmly entrenched. In short, quiet six or so weeks beckoned, allowing sufficient time for preparation for what is clearly a rough first few weeks of the season. It's interesting how a winless preseason can change all that.

When the Cleveland Browns entered training camp, it seemed like the stars were aligning more or less perfectly. An armful of expectations borne of a 10 win season in which they didn't make the playoffs greeted them. No first, second or third round picks assured them that they'd have no holdouts. The starting quarterback already was firmly entrenched. In short, quiet six or so weeks beckoned, allowing sufficient time for preparation for what is clearly a rough first few weeks of the season.

It's interesting how a winless preseason can change all that. Browns fans now approach this team with nearly as much caution and anxiety as they have each of the last nine seasons.

Perhaps that is why general manager Phil Savage took to the podium on Saturday to address the media about the 53-man roster. More than anything else, Savage wanted to inject a little perspective over the Labor Day holiday weekend. Whether it worked or not probably depends on how you feel about Savage. Whether he's

right or not will be easy to tell soon enough.

The thrust of his message was that this is a veteran team that was using the preseason far more for evaluation than for establishing a mythical winning culture. Though Savage said he could have done a better job of communicating that to the media at the outset of training camp, he did allow that the focus really become that until the first half implosion against the New York Giants in week two of the preseason. "From that point on, I think the focus of our preseason changed in terms of, ‘Ok, we're really going to just try and get through this and try to get our young players a good experience here, but let's shoot for Labor day and get as many players as we can up and running.'"

It's a reasonable point of view. The question then is whether that's where the Browns now find themselves.

Let's start with the easy stuff first. Though the team got banged around pretty hard in the last four weeks, no one suffered a catastrophic injury. Key members of the offense in the persons of Derek Anderson, Jamal Lewis and Braylon Edwards, all are set to return on Sunday against Dallas. In fact, it appeared as though all three could have played Thursday night against the Chicago Bears had that been a regular season game. That removes some significant pressure right there. Of course, timing could be an issue but that's a far easier problem to fix than not having those players available at all.

Then there are the combined absences of free safety Brodney Pool and kick returner Josh Cribbs. Officially each is listed as questionable for Sunday. What that means is always hard to say. Players listed as questionable tend to play. It seems like New England Patriots head coach Bill Belichick has listed quarterback Tom Brady as questionable every week for the last six years and he never misses a game.

If neither can play ironically, of the two, Cribbs will be the most missed even

though he has the more capable backup in Syndric Steptoe. So much of the NFL game revolves around field position. Cribbs' unique talent, indeed the reason he's so highly paid, is his uncanny ability to put his team in good field position, whether on a punt or a kickoff. Cribbs also is a valuable gunner when the Browns kick off, often responsible for denying the other team good field position. These are talents that NFL coaches and general managers don't take lightly and neither should the fans. If Cribbs is absent for any length of time, both the offense and defense will suffer accordingly.

As for Pool, he may be the Browns best defensive back, but that's only be default. The preseason revealed just how thin this part of the team really is, even if Pool is healthy. If he's not available, it will be hard to tell given the lack of quality elsewhere anyway. Whether or not Pool plays, the key to stopping other teams will be the play of the defensive line and the linebackers. They have to not only stop the run but get to the quarterback quickly. And defensive coordinator Mel Tucker has to thrown in plenty of blitzes to hopefully paper over the gaping holes.

While that's been the plan all along unfortunately it didn't seem to work all that well in the preseason. The defensive line did play well, Kamerion Wimbley seemed rejuvenated yet the defensive backfield still was exposed. A healthy Pool isn't going to change that and an injured Pool doesn't make it much worse. Simply put, the corners have to play better, much better. Second year players Brandon McDonald and Eric Wright have their moments but they still are way too far between.

Savage addressed this to a certain extent on Saturday but in the sort of confusing way only a general manager could muster. Addressing questions about whether or not there is other help available, such as free agent Ty Law, Savage said "everybody wants to take the magic pill and go get the big name. It's not always the big name that's the answer. This is what we have and this s what we're going with. As Romeo said, maybe if we lose five guys, we'll make some calls."

Translated, Law isn't a magic pill even if he's an upgrade. The problem is that he's a 13-year veteran who at this point is at most a stop gap upgrade, which he already has in the form of Terry Cousin. What Savage really is saying is that he believes both McDonald and Wright will continue to mature and are better for the team in the long run, even if Law can help today. Savage clearly doesn't want to take any playing and hence development time away from his young corners.

Savage may be technically correct, but so much of what he's done in this past offseason has been in an effort to win now that it seems odd that he's now sacrificing that just a bit for the sake of the future. Moreover, there's no guarantee that either McDonald or Wright will develop anyway. Look no further than receiver Travis Wilson, a third round pick in 2006 for proof.

It's why, ultimately, despite the earnest effort to add perspective Savage just ended up underscoring all the reasons it's easy to be uneasy.

***

In addition to the defensive backfield, the Browns enter the regular season a bit thin in two other key areas, offensive line and receiver. The injury to Rex Hadnot on Thursday followed by the placing of Lennie Friedman on injured reserve and the fact that Ryan Tucker is still a few weeks away means that at least in the short term one of the team's great strengths has turned into another of the team's great question marks. Right now, it's the area the can least sustain another injury.

As for the receivers, Savage spent far more time in his press conference addressing the progress Syndric Steptoe made during camp than addressing the flameout of another early round draft pick in Wilson. Savage also spent a considerable amount of time talking down the value of third receivers in general, noting that last year's third receiver had only eight catches.

That may be true, but don't be fooled. The fact that Savage cajoled Joe Jurevicius into remaining with the team as the third receiver tells you everything you need to know about how Savage really values a third receiver. Jurevicius as a second receiver was extremely valuable commodity last season. Not only is he sure handed, but he also seemed to make every third down catch that was needed last season. As a third receiver, he becomes even that much more valuable.

That's where the cutting of Wilson comes in. The bottom line is twofold. First, Savage didn't think Wilson had the talent to ever be the team's number one or number two receiver. Second, Wilson doesn't hold on to the ball nearly enough to be a reliable outlet in the absence of Jurevicius. He may have had six catches against the Bears, but it was the drop of a Ken Dorsey pass down the sidelines for what looked to be a touchdown that was far more noticeable.

Steptoe, on the other hand, seemed to make the difficult catch far more often. Also, given his ability on returns, he's a far more valuable addition. This probably means that Cribbs will be in the mix far more often as a receiver as well, and not just as a fourth receiver, which is something that fans have been clamoring for. If/when Jurevicius is able to return, the Browns may not have the best receiving corps in the league, but they have more than enough to compete.

***

As the Browns get ready for next week's opener against Dallas, the only question on anyone's mind, really, and thus this week's to ponder: Will Jessica Simpson make the trip? And for a follow up: What will she wear? Let's hope it's warm.